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In between rounds of Iranian missile tests, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that America would stand by Israel as it faces threats from the Islamic Republic.

"We are sending a message to Iran that we will defend American interests and the interests of our allies," Rice said. "We take very strongly our obligation to defend our allies and we intend to do that." She said that the US has acted on that obligation by boosting the "security capacity" of Gulf states and by making sure regional allies are able to defend themselves.

She also repeated her statements Wednesday on the need for missile defense as a key means of complicating Iran's ability to threaten the region.

"These are all elements of America's intention and determination to prevent Iran from threatening our interests or the interests of our friends and allies," she explained. "And I don't think the Iranians are too confused either about the capability and the power of the United States to do exactly that." Rice was speaking to reporters in Tbilisi, Georgia, where she was visiting to show support for the pro-Western nation.

The Iranian tests of a long-range missile capable of hitting Israel came amid swelling tension between the two countries. Israel recently conducted military exercises interpreted as simulating how the Jewish state could take on Iran and both nations have exchanged heated rhetoric.

At the same time, the United States has tried to downplay the risk of confrontation. When asked Wednesday, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said he didn't think that the likelihood of war had increased.

"There is a lot of signaling going on. But I think everybody recognizes what the consequences of any kind of a conflict would be," he said.

The White House also backed up Gates's assessment, with Spokesman Tony Fratto telling reporters Thursday, "Secretary Gates was right, there is no particular increase" in the risk of confrontation.

The Iranian missile tests also elicited an outcry from members of Congress.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Illinois) and Rep. Jane Harman (D-California) sent a letter to US President George W. Bush Wednesday urging him to speedily deploy an American ballistic missile defense early-warning radar to Israel, which follows on language in the 2009 defense authorization bill calling for such a deployment to be explored between the US Department of Defense and Israel.

And Rep. Nita Lowey (D-New York), who chairs the appropriations subcommittee on the Middle East, blasted the missile tests Thursday.

"These tests heighten hostility and distrust between Iran and the international community and undermine efforts to make the Middle East and the world safer," she said. "The United States will never fail to defend itself, its interests, and its allies."

Meanwhile, French energy giant Total SA said Thursday it was too risky to invest in Iran for now, raising questions about the future of major Western involvement in developing Iranian gas reserves.

"The conditions are not present for investing in Iran today," said Total spokeswoman Lisa Wiler. "We hope that the political relations will improve so that we can invest."

Total had been in discussions for developing a liquefied natural gas project linked to Iran's South Pars gas field with Malaysia's Petronas.

But Total and oil majors have been under increasing political pressure from the United States and its allies over their activities in Iran amid the mounting tensions over Iran's nuclear program.